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## Research Note: Cindy King

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## FACULTY RESEARCH NOTE

Cindy King

The task of social workers in modern American society has become increasingly more complex and difficult. The social worker is called upon to deal not only with the more traditional responsibilities of interacting with individuals clinically and in the welfare system, but now also with many other critical problems such as child abuse, drug dependency, family dysfunction and a range of psychological disorders associated with a stress-filled world.

Cindy King of the Social Work Department, after spending more than twenty years as a social work clinician, program director and teacher, is currently completing her dissertation at the Heller School at Brandeis University on one of the more serious challenges faced by social workers – the needs of battered women.

For her study, entitled “Stopping the Abuse: A Social Work Perspective,” Cindy sent surveys to eight hundred members of the Massachusetts chapter of NASW (the National Association of Social Workers) and asked them to complete extensive questionnaires designed to describe their practice with battered women. In-depth interviews were also done with thirty of the survey respondents who indicated having had a significant amount of experience with this client group.

The study initially sought to describe exactly who the social workers are who

work with abused women. In addition to standard demographic inquiries, questions addressed educational backgrounds, work settings and functions, theoretical orientations, and whether or not the workers have been victims of abuse. Respondents were also asked what they view to be the cause(s) of domestic violence, what their goals are in relation to battered clients, and what strategies they employ. Cindy is particularly interested in the level of consistency “between social workers’ assumptions about the causes of client problems and the nature of their interventions. A final questions invited respondents to look beyond their own work to recommend changes that should be made on a community level to reduce partner violence.



While her analysis of her data continues, Cindy has been struck by the extent to which social workers have committed themselves to advancing the causes of vulnerable women and the depth of consideration they have given to that effort. From community-based work with poor, single mothers to private practice in affluent suburbs, social workers encounter women who have experienced physical as well as psychological and economic abuse. While some ascribe the causes to individual psychopathology and/or the learning of violent behavioral responses within the family, most fault the historically patriarchal nature of our society. The relegating of women to second class status in economic and political spheres and the

cultural and media fascination with male power and control contribute to a self-fulfilling scenario for many women. It is this scenario that many of these social workers seek to redress.

Practitioners’ recommendations about needed social changes offered many possible intervention points. A number advocated using the schools to teach more about mutual respect, gender equity, effective communication, and conflict resolution, starting at the elementary level. They also recommended incorporating issues of relationship-building and parenting skills for older students. Many would open up the schools to all community residents for on-going learning and support programs. There were also calls for upgrading police and judicial responses (“Treat domestic abuse like any other violent crime”) and for altering the media’s stereotypical portrayals of men and women.

Despite the presumed clinical nature of social work’s focus, the majority of workers deemed changes on the macro level to be crucial. Providing equal pay for equal work, jobs and day care for both financial and esteem inputs, and support for services for abused and abusers alike ranked high. Calls for more male participation in the nurturing of young men and for female participation in the political and judicial arenas were frequent, as were feminist-resounding calls for the end of institutional violence and racism. Cindy expects that when her analysis is complete, she will have been provided with a comprehensive manifesto for community response

While this work continues, Cindy maintains her involvement with professional and academic concerns. She is a founding member of the Committee on Domestic Violence Education and Accountability, which has just become a new subcommittee of NASW and which seeks to enhance education about violence in college curricula and in institutional settings. Cindy’s extensive background in social work, coupled with her current research and commitment to her profession, offers Social Work majors at the College an opportunity to learn from an expert.